Can Texts Be Read? The Anatomy of a Paradox

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ABSTRACT: According to standard philosophical analyses of the ontology of texts, texts are abstract objects. However, that analysis has the paradoxical consequence that texts cannot be read: one cannot read something that lacks material existence. The essay resolves the paradox by introducing a distinction between the ordinary conception of a text—the supposed object of the philosophical analysis of the concept of a text—and the philosophical conception of a text, the end-product of that analysis. It is demonstrated by means of examples that a text as ordinarily conceived is at once physical and immaterial (and so can certainly be read, because of its physical side), and at once one and many, while the philosopher, uninterested in the actual, obviously illogical character of the ordinary conception of a text, turns the text into one abstract object by fiat—an object which cannot, of course, be read. It is argued that the ordinary concept of a text is handy in practical contexts precisely because it ignores troublesome distinctions, while the philosophical concept of a text serves no genuine purpose, since the theoretical understanding of verbal communication requires a partly different intellectual framework.

KEYWORDS: Literary aesthetics – ontology of art – text.

According to standard contemporary thinking in philosophy, texts cannot be *read*, at least not in a literal sense of the word.[1] Texts are thought to be abstract entities, and one cannot, of course, read something that lacks material existence.

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[1] By "a text" I refer to any linguistic composition in communicational use: an oral remark, an email message, a novel, an encyclopaedia in twenty-four volumes, and so on. Texts can thus be short or long, literary or non-literary, written or oral. My essay could just as well have been called "Can Speeches Be Listened to?".

The counter-intuitive consequences of the idea that texts are abstract entities—and of the same idea concerning musical works, whose ontology is often discussed in parallel with texts—were pointed out by Richard Rudner in an article from 1950 which still haunts the ontology of art. As Rudner put it, if artworks are abstract entities, then they are "non-experienceable" (1950, 386). Nor, he observed, can they be created: "a counterintuitive consequence of the position is that Beethoven did not compose [his] *Fifth Symphony*" (ibid., 384). In the philosophical debate about the ontology of art, the question of the possibility of creating abstract objects has drawn more attention than the question of the possibility of experiencing them.[2] In this essay, however, I will concentrate wholly on the paradox, or seeming paradox, that texts cannot be read if we accept standard contemporary philosophical thinking. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that, for me, that paradox has nothing to do with aesthetics specifically but concerns texts in general.

It may appear evident that texts can, quite literally, be read—are you not in fact, quite literally, reading a text right now?—and equally evident that one cannot read something that has no physical existence, so the additional premise that texts are abstract entities does create a conundrum. Nor is the paradox an isolated phenomenon. Many human artefacts confront the philosopher with basically the same problem: it appears natural to understand them as abstract objects, but if one does, counterintuitive consequences make themselves felt. Take the Czech flag as a simple example. No physical object or aggregate of objects can very well be identified with the Czech flag, nor any mental state or occurrence, so the Czech flag will perhaps have to be considered to be an abstract object. But that solution, too, hardly complies with common sense: for example, it will rob the Czech flag of all colours. If the flag is an abstract entity it may no doubt have colours in a manner of speaking, but the flag itself cannot actually possess any colours. (Nor, it seems, can the Czech flag ever have been created.[3]) The pa-

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[2]   That is well illustrated by the recent collection of articles *Art and Abstract Objects*, Mag Uidhir (2013a). See esp. the editor's introduction, Mag Uidhir (2013b).

[3]   Many will be quick to point out that the Czech flag, just like a text, is a *type*, with concrete Czech flags (in the case of the text: copies or exemplars) as its *tokens*. That is true, but not relevant in the present context. Identifying flags or texts with types only produces a classification, a statement about what kind of concept the concepts of a flag and of a text are. The paradoxes remain: you still cannot read a text itself, and the Czech flag itself still has no colours.

radox that texts cannot literally be read (or, for that matter, listened to)[4] thus forms part of a more extensive group of paradoxes around so-called "abstract artefacts".[5] I believe that what I have to say about my chosen paradox has rather obvious bearing on the whole issue of the ontology of abstract artefacts, but I will make no attempt to draw out such consequences here.

The philosopher can attempt to neutralize the counterintuitive consequence that texts cannot be read by pointing out that texts can clearly be read in a manner of speaking, since there will be physical manifestations related to a given text—"copies" or "exemplars", or entities with a similar function—and it will be possible to read those physical manifestations. That is the spirit in which Stephen Davies answers Rudner's challenge. Although a symphony is an abstract object, he says, a symphony can be noisy and triumphant at its close: its being noisy and triumphant at its close means that its "well formed instances" must be noisy and triumphant at its close.[6] Adopted to my paradox, that attitude would amount to saying that one will be able to read copies of a text but never the text itself, just as one will be able to listen to well formed instances of a musical piece but never to the musical piece itself.

To me, that answer does not make the paradox, or the impression of a paradox, go away. My own view is very different: the standard philosophical idea about what a text does indeed create a paradox. The paradox in itself is trivial and easily resolved, but the forces behind its emergence are important and problematic. My essay will concern the paradox, its solution, and the mechanisms responsible for the coming into being of the paradox. To some extent, I will even touch on certain substantive questions regarding linguistic communication that also belong in the picture.

The manifest paradox goes away as soon as one realizes that it relies on an equivocation. There are two concepts of a text in play: on one hand the ordinary, pre-theoretical concept, on the other, the concept that comes out of its philosophical analysis. As we will see, if one adopts the standpoint of

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[4]　See note 1.

[5]　Amie Thomasson's term; cf. Davies (2007, 116).

[6]　Davies (2003, 169-170): "holding that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is abstract does not entail that the work cannot be noisy and triumphant at its close. Instead, it requires that these descriptions of the work are true if those properties are prescribed for its well formed instances."

the ordinary conception of a text the paradox disappears: texts can be read, and it is simply not true that texts are abstract entities. If, on the other hand, one truly accepts the philosophers' analysis the paradox also vanishes: it is simply true that texts are abstract entities, and they certainly cannot be read, at least not literally. The impression of a paradox arises when one fails to keep the two perspectives apart.

If that view of the paradox is correct, and I hope to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that it is, the paradox as such has been successfully dissolved. Yet one is bound to ask oneself what standard contemporary philosophical thinking has done to the ordinary concept of a text, and whether the philosophical operations were for the good or for the bad. That would be interesting to know, for the idea of a text is a vital part of our general workaday understanding of the functioning of linguistic communication.

I will begin by examining the ordinary concept of a text and then go on to a description and an evaluation of the philosophers' analytical reconstruction of the concept. I will in fact be voicing some criticism both of the ordinary concept of a text and of the standard philosophical reinterpretation, and will therefore also point to a third way of thinking about texts, different from both.[7]

1. The ordinary conception of a text

The ordinary conception portrays a text as an individual unified object. A text has a physical side, but the text also exhibits a complex of signs (a "text" in another sense of the word) and a meaning. Very often, texts exist in many exemplars.

That description of a text may sound self-evidently true, but a text, such as the ordinary conception depicts it, is in fact clearly a contradiction in terms.[8] The text is a physical object (for one can read it or listen to it)

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[7]   I have written several times on the ontology of texts, from an early work in Swedish wholly dedicated to the problem, Pettersson (1981), to the chapter "Conceptions of the Text" in my latest book, Pettersson (2012, 145-162). In the present essay I do not depart from the stance taken in my latest book, but I look at the whole issue from a very different angle.

[8]   That fact was demonstrated long ago by Michael Reddy in his well-known study of a basic system of metaphors underlying our thinking about linguistic communication; see Reddy (1979).

containing non-physical elements (for there are words and meanings in the text, and words and meanings are abstract entities), so a text is at once physical and non-physical. There is also a strong suggestion that a text is both one and many, for it is well known that one and the same text can be found in its entirety in many places simultaneously. The physical/non-physical ambiguity is pervasive in talk of texts, and language users often appear completely unaware of that duplicity. The one/many ambiguity seems to me to be less firmly entrenched: I believe that people are more or less conscious of the ambiguity and fully prepared to make a distinction between the one text and its many exemplars.

It is easy to show that texts are indeed being spoken of and written about in the manner just described; examples could be multiplied ad infinitum. Let us first look at two passages about literary texts taken from David Damrosch's *How to Read World Literature* (2009). The first quote refers to Voltaire's *Candide*:

> Interestingly, Voltaire actually presented his book as a translation from the outset. Rather than publish his religiously and sexually scandalous tale under his own name, he had the title page declare that *Candide, ou l'optimisme* was "Traduit de l'Allemand de Mr. le Docteur RALPH" (translated from the German of Dr. Ralph). (2009, 68)

In the quote, *Candide* comes across as being at once physical—as a material book, provided with a title page—and non-physical—as containing words ("Traduit de l'Allemand ...") and meaning (being a "religiously and sexually scandalous tale"). The citation nicely illustrates the tripartite nature of a text, such as texts are ordinarily conceived of.

Concerning the one/many ambiguity, consider the following remark by Damrosch about Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (*Kar*):

> Without translation, the novelist Orhan Pamuk would be unknown outside his native Turkey; thanks to translations, his haunting novel *Kar* can be found in Mexico City airport under the title *Nieve*, bought in Berlin bookshops as *Schnee* and ordered from Amazon.com in its English version, *Snow*. (ibid., 65)

One and the same novel can obviously be found in its entirety in many places at once.

The citations above refer to written, literary texts, but talk of oral texts and non-literary texts follows the same pattern. As a last example I will use

President Obama's 2014 State of the Union address. Barack Obama was speaking to a joint session of the United States Congress on 28 January. On the next day, Paul Steinhauser wrote on the CNN web page:[9]

> Less than half of those surveyed who watched President Barack Obama's State of the Union address reacted very positively to it, a new poll showed.
>
> And [a] while the President emphasized in his speech on Tuesday night that he's willing to bypass Congress and take executive action to accomplish his goals, a CNN/ORC International survey also indicated that only three in 10 said Obama should make unilateral changes to deal with major issues.
>
> During his address, the President told lawmakers that "I'm eager to work with all of you. But America does not stand still, and neither will I. So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that's what I'm going to do."
>
> But two-thirds of those questioned in the poll said that Obama should seek bipartisan compromise when dealing with major issues, with just 30% advocating the President make unilateral changes.

The now familiar pattern emerges here too. The speech by President Obama is a physical event: it can be seen and heard by the members of Congress and by television viewers. But the speech also contains words, like those cited verbatim in the block quote, and it has a meaning: for instance, the President declared himself willing to bypass Congress and take executive action to accomplish his goals. The original speech took place on 28 January 2014, but the speech still exists: it can be found in its entirety in many different places, videotaped or as a written text, and various avatars of the speech can be heard, viewed, or read by different people in various places but at the same time.

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[9] Paul Steinhauser, "CNN Poll: Speech Watcher Reaction Less Positive Than Previous Years". http://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/29/politics/cnn-poll-sotu-response/index.html?iid=article_sidebar (16 March 2014)

2. The ordinary conception, the cluster conception,
and the philosophical conception

As I already pointed out, the ordinary conception of a text is illogical: nothing can be at once physical and non-physical, one and many. Yet that observation is by no means intended as a criticism of Damrosch or Steinhauser, for the ordinary concept of the text is very practical in everyday contexts like theirs, and that is what gives the ordinary concept its raison d'être. I would not want to see that concept banished—except, certainly, from ambitious theoretical analyses of matters having to do with linguistic communication.

It is, however, possible, and sometimes highly motivated, to distinguish clearly between physical exemplars, complexes of signs, and meanings, thus removing all physical/non-physical and one/many ambiguities. For example, my latest book, *The Concept of Literary Application: Readers' Analogies from Text to Life*, was produced in 300 copies. Those copies are physical objects. No matter what copy you open, you will be able to construe the same complex of signs—the same sequence of sentences in English, not to put too fine a point on it—and the same meaning. Different readers may not arrive at an exactly identical meaning, but I will not address the complexities of textual meaning here. For present purposes, we can simply say that there are, right now (things may change), 302 objects with which one potentially has to count when referring to my latest book: the 300 physical copies, the immaterial complex of signs, and the immaterial meaning. When speaking of my latest book, one is in reality speaking of that cluster of objects—of the cluster as a whole, or of parts of it, or of aspects of it. An analogous approach can be adopted to any text (although many cases are far more complicated than my chosen example). Let us call that way of thinking about what a text is "the cluster conception of a text".

The cluster conception differs substantially from the ordinary conception of a text. The ordinary conception achieves its attractive simplicity by neglecting a number of distinctions carefully respected by the cluster conception. The distinction between different copies is not being heeded: viewed through the optics of the ordinary conception, my latest book is *one* object—as if one physical copy, no matter which, were standing in for them all. Further, the copy-no-matter-which is conceived of as a physical object but also as being provided with text (a sequence of sentences) and a meaning: such distinctions as those between patterns of printer's ink

(physical traces) and letters (non-physical signs), and between sentences (sequences of non-physical signs) and meaning (propositions or proposition-like entities), are not being made. The result of ignoring those distinctions is the text as the ordinary conception presents it—and that is a text you can certainly read, for it is a physical thing, even though the text also has abstract constituents of various kinds (words, meaning).

The standard contemporary philosophical conception of a text is something else again. In a sense at least, the philosophical conception is derived from the ordinary conception. The aim of philosophical conceptual analysis is to make concepts clearer by analysing them. The idea is that a somewhat muddled concept, or a concept of which we have a somewhat muddled idea, can be exposed to philosophical scrutiny and reflection, and that the scrutiny and reflection can finally produce a tolerably perspicuous and logical version of the concept. Let us follow a philosopher explaining the philosophical conception of a text and providing a motivation for it: David Davies, in his book *Aesthetics and Literature* (2007).

Davies is speaking of literary texts (literary *works*, in his terminology, which is also the terminology normally used in analytical aesthetics), not of texts in general, but that makes no real difference to me: my concept of a text includes both literary and non-literary texts, and it should be obvious that a novel printed in 300 copies exists in precisely the same manner as my latest book, whatever that manner is. Davies has just discussed some intricate arguments for the idea that paintings are physical objects, and he now proceeds to dealing with literary texts.

> Fortunately, we don't need to dwell further on these questions in order to see that, were it to be suggested that *literary* works are physical objects, no such subtle stratagems would avail. For it is obvious upon even the briefest reflection that there is no physical object which has anything like the identity and persistence conditions of a literary work. Any individual copy of a literary work—including the original manuscript—can perish without threatening the work's existence. Nor can we identify a literary work with the entire collection of physical copies of a book. For one thing, this would mean that the work was still coming into existence as long as new copies were being printed. And we surely want to insist that, even if all physical copies of a literary work were destroyed, and no new copies were ever printed, the work itself could still persist as long as it was preserved in the memory of either its author or those who have read it. For similar reasons, when we spoke ... of the artistic

vehicle of a literary work as a text, we cannot have meant by that a par-
ticular physical object or collection of physical objects. But what, then,
did we mean? (2007, 18-19)

Davies then points to a specific abstract entity as being identical to a lite-
rary work: a "text-type as used as an artistic vehicle in a particular genera-
tive context" (ibid., 30)—that is, approximately, a given sentence or se-
quence of sentences as actually used by a person on some specific occasion.
Davies' analysis is a representative example of how the philosophical con-
ception of a text comes about. The physical part of the ordinary version of
the text is being amputated, as it were, and that is why the text, in the phi-
losopher's version, cannot literally be read.[10]

It needs to be said that *Aesthetics and Literature* is an introductory text-
book, but I am still confident in presenting David Davies's general way of
thinking as being representative. The ontology of art, which includes the
problem of what kind of entity a (literary) text is, is one of Davies's special-
ties. The idea that texts are abstract entities is the majority view in philos-
ophy, and Davies's diagnosis of what kind of abstract entity a text is,
quoted above, comes very close to those of other leading aestheticians like,
for instance, Jerrold Levinson and Robert Stecker.[11] The methodological
problems with Davies's analysis, to which I attend in the next section, are
equally typical.

3. Some methodological issues

The most interesting question, faced with the philosophical conception
of the text, is of course how good and reasonable that conception is. Before
coming to that, however, I would like to bring up some methodological is-
sues while David Davies's argument is still fresh in our minds.

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[10]   It is easy to show that the idea of a text, literary or non-literary, does not reduce to
the idea of a physical object, and that result can be achieved in several ways. For exam-
ple, Mag Uidhir argues that repeatable artworks (like musical and literary works) must
be abstract objects since repeatable artworks "cannot be coherently or viably construed
as concrete things" (2013b, 8, note 4).

[11]   See Levinson (1996, 146), (a musical work is "a structure-as-indicated-by-P-at-t-
in-musicohistorical-context-C") and Stecker (2003, 88) (literary works are "structures-
in-use"). See also Levinson (2013).

Davies's analysis has no empirical backing. As far as I understand, his analysis of the ordinary conception is based on his own understanding of the concept of a text in his capacity of a competent user of English, and on profound familiarity with the philosophical discussion about that concept in his philosophical tradition, and on philosophical reflection. But he does not seem to have made any attempt to collect examples of how the ordinary concept of a text is actually employed, and for what purposes, in order to get a firmer grasp of its logic. If Davies had actually sought to gather and analyse that kind of evidence, he might well have seen that the ordinary conception of a text is logically incoherent (but has other redeeming features, more important than logical coherence in very many contexts).

As it is now, Davies is probably not aware of the ambiguities built into the ordinary conception of the text, and that creates its own problems. The easiest way of making the point I am driving at may be to say that, as a consequence, Davies is probably also unaware of the very substantial differences between the concept he is analysing (the ordinary conception of the text) and the concept that comes out of his analysis (his philosophical conception of the text). Indeed, there is no sign that he keeps the two conceptions apart.

Davies is right in pointing out that a text, such as texts are portrayed by ordinary language, cannot be reduced to a physical object or a collection of physical objects. But nor can one reduce the text, in its ordinary version, to an abstract object, as Davies does. (After all, as long as we are speaking in everyday, common-sense terms, texts can certainly be read.) To be able to present texts as logically impeccable entities, one will have to depart from the ordinary conception of a text. If one wishes to think of a text as one specific logically impeccable object, one will simply have to get rid of some of the ordinary concept's contradictory elements. The text will have to be made either physical or non-physical, either one or many. Davies chooses to make it one and to make it abstract, but he does not see that that is a decision on his part rather than an analysis of the ordinary concept of a text. There is a confusion at the bottom of the philosophical conception of the text: the philosophers do not quite perceive that the ordinary conception and their own conception are two different things.

Philosophers like to disqualify such alternatives as the cluster conception by portraying them as absurd denials of the incontrovertible fact that texts exist—that is, of the supposed fact that, for every text, there is some distinct object that is the text itself. But I do not deny that my latest book

exists, which would be ludicrous. The criticism builds on a mistake. The trump card in the philosophical argument is the demonstration that the cluster conception and similar notions do not tally with the ordinary conception of the text, according to which the text is a specific, single object. But the ordinary conception cannot be the criterion of correctness, for the ordinary conception is illogical. Texts, such as the ordinary conception portrays them, certainly cannot exist in reality (but only in language and thought), for they are contradictions in terms. Indeed, the philosophical conception, too, would have to go if the ordinary conception were to be taken as the criterion of correctness, for the philosophical conception does not measure up to the ordinary conception either. According to the philosophical conception, texts cannot be read—an absurdity, if one adopts the standpoint of the ordinary conception.

In brief, I believe that the philosophical discussion of what a text is exhibits several weaknesses. There is too uncritical an endorsement of our received concept of a text, too little interest in empirically grounded investigation of the structure and function of the concept, and too little attention to what is sometimes called "the paradox of analysis"—the fact, in principle well known, that philosophical analysis inevitably changes the concept under analysis to a larger or lesser extent.[12]

4. Problems with the philosophical conception of a text

The dominating philosophical conception of a text can be said to be that of a complex of signs as used on a specific occasion by a certain sender. As we saw, the philosophical conception diverges strongly from the ordi-

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[12] Robert Stecker observes that his own characterization of musical and literary works as "abstract structural types" introduces a concept that is "a theoretical one not in ordinary use", something which I find perceptive and candid. Stecker nevertheless denies that his concept is "revisionary", since he thinks that it "captures a maximal set of shared intuitions about such works" (2003, 94, note 12). It is tempting to observe that the intuition that literary works can be *read* seems a highly significant intuition not captured by Stecker's concept. But the real problem with reasoning such as Stecker's lies elsewhere: the value of our "intuitions" about literary works/texts is taken for granted, and no attempt is made to understand and evaluate the structure and function of the ordinary concept of a text. That would require, as a basis, an empirical study of how the concept is actually used.

nary conception of a text, but is the philosophical conception a good one, considered in its own right?

The first question to ask is: a good conception for what purpose? We should not answer: a good conception for taking the place of the text such as ordinary language portrays the text, for it should be clear by now that the ordinary conception is intellectually untenable despite its practical usefulness, and that its practical usefulness depends on its lack of logical consistence. The concept is economical to use precisely because it disregards a number of fundamental distinctions, and nothing can occupy its place successfully without being equally contradictory. What we really need—not in unpretentious contexts, but when theoretical precision is required—is a better conceptualization of linguistic communication than the everyday model that revolves around the sending and receiving of texts such as ordinary language portrays them.

In my view, the concept of a complex of signs as used on a specific occasion by a certain sender does have a place in such a conceptualization. David Davies and his fellow philosophers are entirely right in insisting that some of what listeners and readers establish in a genuine situation of real-world linguistic communication is such a contextualized complex of signs. A sentence or a sequence of sentences can, in itself, often be given innumerable different concrete interpretations—the linguist Roy Harris has pointed, very appositely, to the one-word sentence "Yes" (1981, 200)—but the listener or reader in a genuine situation does not treat the complex of signs as a linguistic formula in abstracto but as something uttered by a specific person and supplied with a specific communicative point. I have no objection to that analysis, and when offering the cluster conception's picture of a text and speaking of a complex of signs as forming part of that picture, I had in mind a complex of signs as used by a given individual on a given occasion. I do thus not find any fault with the concept per se. When explaining how linguistic communication works, it is difficult to get by without the idea of a complex of signs as actually used by a sender on a specific occasion.

I can see no reason, however, *to identify the complex of signs with the text*. In ordinary language, when speaking informally, we have the ordinary conception of the text at our disposal, and that conception serves us well. And in purely theoretical contexts, when attempting to achieve the best possible understanding of linguistic communication, we do not need the concept of a text. The philosopher's ambition to have a well-analysed conception of a text is a consequence of the mistaken elevation of the ordinary conception

to a norm. Since, according to the ordinary conception, texts exist, it is felt that one needs to be able to point to an object that is the text itself, and the contextualized complex of signs can be thought to be a promising candidate. In reality, however, the complex of signs does not fill that bill: the complex of signs does not answer at all to the ordinary conception of the text. Unlike the text, the complex of signs cannot be read—nor, strictly speaking, does the complex of signs have a meaning. (True, the complex of signs has a meaning in a manner of speaking since there is meaning associated with the complex of signs, but the complex of signs itself cannot be said to actually have a meaning.)

Also, if one compares the philosophical conception with the cluster conception it becomes obvious that the philosophical conception only covers part of what is involved in the ordinary talk of texts. The physical exemplars are being left aside, and also the meaning. The philosophical conception picks out one element in the cluster in an ultimately arbitrary fashion. The contextualized complex of signs can certainly be made the starting-point of a definition of the whole cluster: the relevant exemplars can be defined as the exemplars exhibiting the relevant contextualized complex of signs, and the relevant meaning can be defined as the meaning associated with that contextualized complex of signs. But one could just as well choose a physical exemplar as one's starting-point, defining the other relevant exemplars as the exemplars exhibiting the same contextualized complex of signs and the relevant meaning as the meaning associated with that contextualized complex of signs. The contextualized complex of signs does not occupy a privileged position within the cluster.

It is perhaps easy to believe that the contextualized complex of signs must, after all, be the systematically central factor in the cluster, the element that, in the final instance, really defines and determines the others. But that is not so. If one looks for a systematically central factor, one should look to a physical object. Let me round off the discussion of the philosophical conception with a concrete example.

In 1862 or 1863 Emily Dickinson wrote an untitled poem beginning "I heard a fly buzz when I died". An original manuscript is preserved: a single copy in Dickinson's own hand, now in the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.[13] If something can be said to define the poem, it is

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[13] See Dickinson (1981, 591). Cf. Emily Dickinson Museum – The Manuscripts: http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily_manuscripts (12 June 2014).

that original manuscript. Certainly not the contextualized complex of signs that the manuscript represents, for the idea of what that complex of signs should be taken to be has changed considerably over time. Dickinson's early editors can be said to have treated her somewhat condescendingly, "improving" her texts by removing some of their unconventional formal traits, something which also affected "I heard a fly buzz when I died". That practice is now a thing of the past, but editors still waver about how best to define the complexes of signs associated with her poems. In particular, Dickinson frequently uses an idiosyncratic sign, a kind of punctuation mark often described as an elongated dot. For a long period, such marks were consistently rendered as n-dashes by Dickinson's editors, but in the latest scholarly edition, R.W. Franklin's 1998 edition of Dickinson's collected poems, the marks are presented as a kind of free-standing hyphens.[14] The contextualized complex of signs associated with Dickinson's "I heard a fly buzz when I died" is thus a contested entity hard to pin down, but not so the slowly yellowing piece of paper with traces from her pen that is her original manuscript. That manuscript can be said to define her poem. To put it simply: the manuscript is one of the exemplars, and the other exemplars are the copies of (copies of …) the manuscript. The contextualized complex of signs is the complex of signs represented by that manuscript and hence by every adequate copy (whatever we take that complex of signs to be), and the meaning of Dickinson's poem is the meaning of the complex of signs as produced by her in 1862 or 1863. (Much more could be said about textual meaning—I do not want to convey the impression that I take textual meaning to be a simple or even a singular entity—but this is not the place or the time.)

5. A trivial paradox and its deeper interest

Texts can certainly be read. The paradox around the readability of texts only arises when one attempts to press the ordinary concept of a text to perform heavy theoretical duty for which it was never conceived.

The paradox or seeming paradox is a symptom of dual allegiances in the philosopher: adherence to a traditional framework of views and approaches

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[14]   See Dickinson, "591", in Dickinson (1998, 587-588). The volume editor R.W. Franklin also registers the textual history of the poem (ibid., 588).

and, at the same time, aspiration to theoretical consistency. The paradox is a sign of the impossibility of simply combining those two attitudes, and therein consists, for me, its deeper interest. We should learn from the paradox that the concept of a text belongs in ordinary language, while the more fine-grained conceptualization of linguistic communication requires a different outlook and partly different notions.

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